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India: Authorities in Madhya Pradesh should stop harassment of activists

Authorities in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh should stop the harassment and intimidation of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) activists, Amnesty International said today. The NBA has been leading a peaceful protest demanding adequate rehabilitation of *adivasi* (indigenous) and other marginalized communities displaced and otherwise affected by the ongoing Narmada river valley projects.

On 29 October hundreds of people displaced or affected by the Indira Sagar and Omkareshwar dams on the Narmada river marched to the Khandwa district administration office. They demanded that the Madhya Pradesh government fully comply with a court order to complete, by December 2009, rehabilitation measures for communities displaced and otherwise affected by these two dams. The protestors were also demanding that officials consult the affected communities and sought an audience with the District Collector.

When the protestors attempted to enter the office of the District Collector, the police used batons to disperse the demonstrators, injuring seven persons. They also arrested 19 protestors, including key activists of the NBA. The police pressed charges for offences under Sections 323 and 332 (voluntarily causing hurt to deter a public servant from discharge of duty), 353 (assault or applying criminal force to deter a public servant from discharge of duty and 294 (performing obscene acts and songs) of the Indian Penal Code, 1860.

The following day, the anti-terror squad of the state police raided the NBA office in Khandwa. The police seized papers belonging to the organization, sealed the office for an hour and arrested another key activist. The police also charged all 20 activists with more serious offences with regard to the previous day's incidents, under Sections 147 (rioting) and 333 (causing grievous hurt to deter a public servant from discharge of duty) of the Code.

The 20 arrested activists, including Alok Agarwal, Chittarooma Palit, Kamla Yadav and Ramkuwar Rawat were detained for a week before being released on bail on the orders of various courts on 6 November. However they face serious charges which could result in punishment of more than seven years' imprisonment.

Amnesty International is concerned that the raid on the NBA office by the anti-terror squad of the police and bringing the additional more serious charges of rioting and causing grievous hurt are politically motivated. As such they appear to be an attempt by the authorities to harass and intimidate the NBA activists.

Amnesty International calls on the Madhya Pradesh government to:

- stop the harassment of NBA activists and drop the politically-motivated charges against them;

- immediately order an independent, impartial and thorough inquiry into the use of force by the police, and ensure that any officer suspected of arbitrary or abusive use of force is prosecuted under the criminal law;
- ensure that police officials use force only when strictly necessary and to the minimum extent required for the performance of their duty;

Background

The NBA is a grassroots social movement which has campaigned for the last two decades against the adverse social and environmental consequences of large scale dams which have been developed as part of the Narmada River Valley Development plan.

Narmada is the fifth largest river in India and flows west over a length of 1,312 km before draining into the Gulf of Cambay in Gujarat. The Narmada River Valley Development plan is a 20 year multipurpose power and irrigation project, consisting of 30 dams including two large scale dams, implemented by the states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, displacing and otherwise affecting thousands of persons belonging to *adivasis* and other marginalized communities.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org